CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

Interview with **LORAINE BENNETT**
Conducted by **BETTY KING**

Loraine Bennett was Ward 6 Coordinator in the 1978 and 1982 Barry campaigns. In 1979, she was appointed to the DC Human Rights Commission. Between 1983 and 1991 she served in the Mayor's Office of Constituent Services and later as Special Assistant in the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Economic Development. In 1991, she received the Mayor's Distinguished Public Service Award. She was a private consultant on community development until she returned to DC government as a manager in the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs in 1999. She retired in 2005.

October 8, 2015

BETTY KING: Today is October the 8th, I believe. My name is Betty King, and I am talking to Lorraine Bennett.

Lorraine, when did you come to the District?

LORAINE BENNETT: 1965. I came here from—I had been in college in Pittsburgh at Duquesne University, then went to work in Louisiana for a year and a half with CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality. And then when I got back to Pittsburgh, I was sort of footloose, called an old roommate, who lived and was from D.C., who said, "Come visit," and basically I came here to visit her, went back and got my stuff, and I was in the District until I retired many years later in 2005.

BETTY KING: So what year was it that you came here?

LORAINE BENNETT: '65.

BETTY KING: '65. And when did you meet Marion Barry?

LORAINE BENNETT: '65. It turns out that my old roommate was dating someone named Lester McKinnie, who then later became Baba Zulu, but Lester was Marion's roommate, and they were chair and co-chair, something, but anyway, the leaders of the Free D.C. Movement, which was D.C.'s SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee], to be distinguished from Howard University's chapter, and Florida—I think it was on Florida Avenue. So, my girlfriend then, my roommate, who I came to visit and then stayed with, was teaching at Catholic University in the daytime, told me that what I should do is start volunteering to get to know people, start volunteering at the Free D.C. office. And so, that's what I did. And that's how I

met Marion and Marshall Brown [Ward 1 coordinator in Barry's 1978 campaign] and Ivanhoe [Donaldson, Barry's 1978 Campaign Manager]and a lot of people.

BETTY KING: They were all involved in the SNCC.

LORAINE BENNETT: They were. They were. It was Free D.C. It was the bus boycott. I didn't know where I was, but I was standing on street corners handing out bus boycott flyers.

BETTY KING: Handing out what?

LORAINE BENNETT: Bus boycott. They were boycotting O. Roy Chalk [owner of the bus company in DC].

BETTY KING: Oh, that's right. They were the Chalk.

LORAINE BENNETT: Yeah.

BETTY KING: Chalk, not—

LORAINE BENNETT: Chalk, yeah.

BETTY KING: Oh, that's right. [Laughs.]

LORAINE BENNETT: That's right. So, that was my introduction to the city. So, my whole introduction to the city was by way of this political action group.

BETTY KING: And how long did you do that?

LORAINE BENNETT: I think for about a year, a year and a half. I ended up meeting my now ex-husband, but for a long time husband, and still good friend, and got married in '66, late '66, and sort of—but kept in touch with Marion. By that time—I'm fast-forwarding a little bit. Sometime during those early years of the early '70s, late '60s, he started Pride, Incorporated [a youth training and employment program], and we went to some of his fundraisers. And then my ex-husband was an artist and donated some of his paintings to grace the walls of Pride.

And so, we kept sort of a little bit in touch as our family grew, supported him when he ran for School Board, ran into him when I was pregnant with my daughter, just kept running into him. And then we would get notes from him, and we would show up to support him at different events and activities.

BETTY KING: Okay. Did you actually work on his campaign for the School Board and later? And how about his campaign at large for the City Council? Did you work on that campaign?

LORAINE BENNETT: I didn't work on that—we volunteered.

BETTY KING: Well, that's working.

LORAINE BENNETT: Yes, yes, we volunteered, volunteered. At that point, we were living in Ward 6 on Capitol Hill, and I remember, yeah, when he ran for Council volunteering, handing out flyers, working the polls.

BETTY KING: Yeah. And then that was—he ran first in '74, and then in '76, he ran for reelection because he got a short term when—

LORAINE BENNETT: That's right. That's right. And he was chair of—I went to work during those years. 1971, I went to work for D.C. Government.

BETTY KING: Indeed. In what capacity?

LORAINE BENNETT: I was a revenue officer with the D.C. then Department of Finance and Revenue.

BETTY KING: Aha.

LORAINE BENNETT: I was the only D.C. resident who was a revenue officer. Most employees then were Maryland residents, as were all of the leaders of the agency. And I recall this specifically because by this point, at some point in there, Marion became chair of the [City Council's] Committee on Finance and Revenue and had oversight over the agency. And there was a lot of acrimony between him and the director of the agency about different issues.

And one day—and I had lost touch with him a little bit. I was watching him from afar as this point. And one day I looked up, and our agency director [Ken Back] was there with Marion Barry showing him around the agency. And he saw me and he said, "What are you doing here?" And I said, "I work here." And so, we chatted a while, and he asked about [my daughter] Jackie, who was—by that time, I had another child, a son, but anyway, he asked about her specifically, my daughter, and we talked about [my husband] Bennett, and we talked just about people we had in common, and then he left with Ken Back. Well, immediately after he left the building, I was called to the director's office and reminded that any communication I had with any council member was to—I was not to discuss any agency business and really should not be having any communication. Yeah.

BETTY KING: [Laughs.] That didn't go down very well.

LORAINE BENNETT: No, it didn't. And for that matter, sometime after that, the Department of Finance and Revenue was hosting the National Association of Tax Assessors or something like that convention in D.C., and so the agency staff were recruited to help support the whole conference. And the women in my office were working on tours for spouses, mostly wives, so assume they were all going to be women, of the tax assessors coming. And so, they showed me, because I was good with English grammar, they showed me the draft flyer and asked me to proofread it. And I looked at it, and on there was a tour for the spouses of the Embassy of South Africa.

BETTY KING: Ah.

LORAINE BENNETT: So I said, "Are you guys reading the paper?" You know, the Council, with Marion Barry, the chair of Finance and Revenue, is leading, you know, spearheading, an effort for the city to boycott South African investments and all South African engagements. And they said, "Oh, that doesn't matter," and they went ahead and ignored me.

So, what I did was go out into the hall and used a payphone and called Council Member Barry's office and spoke with [the Staff Director for his committee] Ed Meyers, who was working for him then, and told him, "Please tell Council Member Barry," and I said who I was, "that what was going on." Well, a few days later the woman who showed me the draft came to me and she said, "I know you did this. I know you had something to do with this." But it had been canceled, the tour was rearranged for another embassy. That was fun. That was fun. That was getting my lick. Well, it was the right thing to do, but it was also getting my little get-back for being chastised for knowing the council member.

BETTY KING: Well, of course. Of course, it was irresistible. I know. Please, I mean, they should have, you know, welcomed you and exploited you to, you know, be a bridge to him instead of saying that you couldn't talk to him.

LORAINE BENNETT: Yeah. Yeah.

BETTY KING: Now, then in '76, Marion ran again for reelection, but you were still—

LORAINE BENNETT: I was working for—yes, I was in with D.C. Government until—when did I retire? I'm not even sure when I retired. I didn't retire, when I quit. '79, I believe.

BETTY KING: No, it must have been '78 because you were coordinating Ward 6, and you couldn't have done that if you were a government employee. Oh, I see.

LORAINE BENNETT: I think I may have. I think my—Bennett, my ex-husband, was probably the lead in terms of the names that were on documents and all that.

BETTY KING: Oh, I see. I see.

LORAINE BENNETT: But by that time, we had bought a house in Anacostia, and the part that—well, Anacostia is really a small neighborhood, and it was in Ward 6 at the time. So, yes, we were the coordinators for Ward 6 east of the river.

BETTY KING: East. I see. Okay. So, you were still working for the government at that time.

LORAINE BENNETT: I was. Yes.

BETTY KING: Okay. So, tell me, was there a big—and then Rob Robinson ran the west side of Ward 6?

LORAINE BENNETT: Yes. Yes.

BETTY KING: Okay. Was there a large presence of [either of Marion's opponents in the 1978 campaign, incumbent Mayor] the Walter Washington or the [incumbent Council Chairman] Sterling Tucker campaigns that you saw on either side of the river in Ward 6? Was there a lot of organizing the way—

LORAINE BENNETT: I didn't see that. I didn't see it. There were more Walter Washington supporters that I remember, particularly people who—well, he was the sitting Mayor, and so he had some of the democratic leadership establishment supporting him.

BETTY KING: Right.

LORAINE BENNETT: But I don't remember that it was at the grassroots level at all. It was civic organization leaders, that sort of thing.

BETTY KING: Yeah.

LORAINE BENNETT: But nothing substantial that I remember.

BETTY KING: Because what I'm finding in talking to the people who were organizing the wards, that there wasn't the kind of aggressive recruitment of people at any level—

LORAINE BENNETT: Right.

BETTY KING: —and every corner of the ward that we did. And I'm surprised they did as well as they did considering—

LORAINE BENNETT: Yeah. There was no passion anywhere but in our campaign. I remember that, that there was no passion.

BETTY KING: Yeah.

LORAINE BENNETT: And the other thing that I remember was that it was—and one of the things I've always appreciated Marion for, and really appreciated him for, is the inclusiveness of his campaigns and his administration. But I know that there are people, there are types of people—I mean, every other candidate had a niche, whether it was Ward 4, you know, uptown black community. I don't know who Sterling had, I'm not sure. But I know that everybody had a niche, and Marion had a little bit of everybody's niche, and then some big ones, you know, disenfranchised communities, not so much the black community, but gay community. It just seemed like he had some of everybody. Latino community.

BETTY KING: And the aging.

LORAINE BENNETT: And the aging, yeah, yeah. And so, his niche was everybody. You know, there wasn't just one pocket that you could say.

BETTY KING: And certainly there's no question that the white voters turned out massively for Marion in 1978.

LORAINE BENNETT: They did. They did. Right.

BETTY KING: Never to that extent again, but, I mean, that was significant.

LORAINE BENNETT: And he had a hard time accepting that, as I recall conversations with him, and I'm sure others had them, too.

BETTY KING: You all can read his book [published shortly before his death in 2015].

LORAINE BENNETT: Yeah. When Capitol Hill didn't like him anymore, he wouldn't accept it, and I had arguments. I would just go, "They don't like you anymore, and it's not about you personally, it's about what you have done

BETTY KING: Yeah.

LORAINE BENNETT: I sat in many—after I went back to—when I went to work for him and was a ward coordinator in the government, sitting in meetings in people's homes, you know, we had gatherings, precinct gatherings, and people being upset that not even the majority, but a large number of agency directors were African American. And it just seemed so—it was like we were stepping backwards to explain, "Don't you think that it's fair that the government leadership

reflect the population of the city?" I mean, it's something that was so basic to me. But I felt it slipping. You know, they didn't like it, and they didn't want to say that.

BETTY KING: Right.

LORAINE BENNETT: They didn't want to say what it was.

BETTY KING: And it's not as if the people that Marion hired weren't totally competent.

LORAINE BENNETT: Right. Right.

BETTY KING: You know, and respected, you know, and did their jobs well, particularly in the first administration when we had, you know, Elijah [Rogers, City Administrator] and Jim Gibson [Deputy Mayor for Planning] and [Deputy Mayor] Carroll Harvey and all those folks as deputy mayors.

LORAINE BENNETT: Right. And he had the good sense to hold on to some people that some of us wished he had gotten rid of because he wanted the continuity, he wanted people to know as much as the departing people knew.

BETTY KING: Yeah.

LORAINE BENNETT: I remember that, too. I remember being one of those who sort of resented his holding on to some folks, and in retrospect now, I know that it was a smart thing to do.

BETTY KING: Yeah, because you can't—you know, you may be a new broom and so forth, but you don't want to sweep out all institutional knowledge.

LORAINE BENNETT: Right. Right.

BETTY KING: Yeah. So election day comes and Ward 6 delivers big time for Marion, as I recall.

LORAINE BENNETT: Right.

BETTY KING: And you are still working for the government.

LORAINE BENNETT: I was. And then I was very active in my children's school, then it was Peabody. It's grown to be just about a college campus now, but it was Peabody, and I was—I think I—I'm not sure if I was PTA [Parent Teacher Association] president then or had been. Anyway, I was invited to run for the School Board from Ward 6, and I was part of a crowd, a

Barry-supported slate, that the [*Washington] Post* called, and I don't know who else, but we were called the Marionettes.

BETTY KING: [Laughs.] Oh, dear.

LORAINE BENNETT: Out of I think there were six of us, I was one of the two, I believe, who lost. I lost to a guy who had been the—so I had quit my job at Finance and Revenue in order to run for the School Board. I didn't have to, but I wanted to.

BETTY KING: So that would have been, what, 19—

LORAINE BENNETT: That was '79 or '80.

BETTY KING: '79. Okay.

LORAINE BENNETT: '79 or '80.

BETTY KING: Okay.

LORAINE BENNETT: So I quit, and I lost. I lost by 12 votes against a guy who had been there for 6 years.

BETTY KING: 12 votes?

LORAINE BENNETT: Yeah. This was his third term, I think. Yeah. So, it was—

BETTY KING: It was tough.

LORAINE BENNETT: It was tough, yeah, it was tough. And he was an incumbent. And he, you know—so I could say about that experience is it was one of the best ones I ever had in terms of my own personal development. Probably a good thing that I didn't win because I don't know that I was—I would have—I think I would have become totally disillusioned once I observed the board more closely. So, there I was, you know, then without a job. And so, I started working part-time for the School Board and keeping an eye on things. I worked for one of the council members, the board members. And then Marion ran for reelection. In the meantime, though, I served on the city's Human Rights Commission for a while, I think about 2 or 3 years. And then he ran for reelection.

BETTY KING: In '82, this was.

LORAINE BENNETT: In '82.

BETTY KING: And he was running against Patricia Roberts Harris, wasn't he?

LORAINE BENNETT: I don't even remember.

BETTY KING: I think so.

LORAINE BENNETT: Yeah.

BETTY KING: I think so.

LORAINE BENNETT: Yeah. I don't even remember. But then I became an employee of the campaign and was the Ward 6 coordinator, and then joined the government after that.

BETTY KING: In what? The Office of Constituent Services?

LORAINE BENNETT: That's right. I was the Ward 6 coordinator.

BETTY KING: And?

LORAINE BENNETT: And what was a wonderful experience.

BETTY KING: Oh, yeah, that's great.

LORAINE BENNETT: Oh, my god.

BETTY KING: I know.

LORAINE BENNETT: I loved it. I worked with you a lot.

BETTY KING: Right.

LORAINE BENNETT: I worked—and I have always—and he knew this—I've always thanked him because he helped me find a way to combine my love for community with advocacy for the government, and to be in the middle between the government and the community. I love that.

BETTY KING: Right.

LORAINE BENNETT: And I continued to do it later after I left the Mayor's Office. And I never really thought I had a skill until then.

BETTY KING: [Laughs.] Really?

LORAINE BENNETT: You know? I knew how to do things, but I never found something that just made me happy and feel as fulfilled as I did. And I did it until I retired from D.C. Government because I managed to stay in that kind of—

BETTY KING: So tell me, in '82, you helped with the campaign.

LORAINE BENNETT: That's right.

BETTY KING: You were then not employed by the government.

LORAINE BENNETT: That's right.

BETTY KING: So you could be upfront about—

LORAINE BENNETT: That's right.

BETTY KING: —being the coordinator for Ward 6.

LORAINE BENNETT: For all of Ward 6, right.

BETTY KING: All of Ward 6. Okay.

LORAINE BENNETT: Right.

BETTY KING: And then when Marion was reelected, you went into Constituent Services. And how long did you stay there?

LORAINE BENNETT: Until '86, when I went to work for the Deputy Mayor for Economic Development.

BETTY KING: Did you?

LORAINE BENNETT: I wanted to learn some more, some other things. And I loved economic development. I became very, very interested in economic development. So—

BETTY KING: Oh, and particularly on H Street that seems to me.

LORAINE BENNETT: H Street.

BETTY KING: Weren't you deeply involved in the H Street development?

LORAINE BENNETT: I was. I was.

BETTY KING: Yeah.

LORAINE BENNETT: And I was really concerned about Martin Luther King [Avenue]—H Street and Martin Luther King Avenue. And I had begun—yeah, I was very interested in community development and economic development. So, I went to work for—Carol Thompson was Deputy Mayor for Economic Development then. And then it changed a few times. But I ended up working on the Convention Center, which was helping develop community support for the Convention Center at its new—

BETTY KING: The new—

LORAINE BENNETT: —where it ended up being. Mayor Barry had proposed the site at Mount Vernon [Square], and worked on that a lot. And then helped develop a whole community support system in the local business community. But then when Mayor Kelly came in [in 1990], she didn't like that site, and I was riffed [dismissed under a Reduction in Force procedure] from D.C. Government at that time. I really loved it, that the Convention Center ended up being built there years later.

BETTY KING: [Laughs.]

LORAINE BENNETT: And, yeah, yeah. So, I stayed in economic development working on the Convention Center mostly more than any other issue.

BETTY KING: Yeah. Well, then, now, tell about your daughter, Jackie, because she followed you into government, didn't she?

LORAINE BENNETT: She did. She did. So, one thing that—our family story, it's not just my daughter, my son, too. I think Marion's influence on our lives, on our family's life, has been huge. My children both went through the Mayor's Youth Leadership Institute. I say children, one is 45 and the other is 48, but they're still my children.

BETTY KING: They're always going to be children to you.

LORAINE BENNETT: Right. They both went through the Mayor's Youth Leadership Institute. My son, when he was there, he only stayed for one year, but he ran for youth mayor. My daughter stayed with the Institute for 3 years and became a trainer. Then she went to UDC [the University of the District of Columbia]. But then as soon as she was old enough to apply, she joined the Police Department. And she was the youngest, for about 2 years, she was the youngest member of the D.C. Police Department, because she was 21 when she went in. So, then she was working the streets in the First District.

And then when Marion was reelected after his term in prison, I'm not sure how it all happened, but everyone around him knew Jackie by this point, had seen her through all the years of growing up, and mentioned she was a police officer, and the next thing she knew, she was being invited to meet with some of the members of his police detail to see if she would like to join. And so, I'm sure she was vetted. And so, she went to work on—now it's called—it's an assignment, it's not a detail anymore, the Executive Protection Unit, and she is now a senior member.

BETTY KING: Great.

LORAINE BENNETT: And getting ready to retire in a couple years.

BETTY KING: That's not possible.

LORAINE BENNETT: Yeah. Yeah.

BETTY KING: We're not as young as we used to be. [Laughs.]

LORAINE BENNETT: I know. I know. I know. So, it's not just my life. And my kids, my son is—just the whole example that you can make a difference in your community. He's in Denmark, but he's very active in politics and in issues in Denmark, particularly those that relate to refugees and immigrants and people who are struggling. Yeah.

BETTY KING: Yeah. Well, that's wonderful. So, Marion's election and his political career had a positive impact for you and your family and you think also for the city.

LORAINE BENNETT: I think we ought to be grateful to him for a lot, for a lot, for a lot. There was one memory that I think that I've shared, might have shared, with you before, is that one of my favorite recollections—I have two really: one an insight, one a recollection.

A good friend of mine who knew Marion very, very well all through his time on the School Board, and as a council member, and after he became Mayor, told me once when I was expressing some frustration with him, she said that she had picked him up at the airport once and was watching him, she was in the waiting area, and she watched him walk through the tunnel from the plane coming into the terminal, and he was walking by himself, and she said, "There's the most alone person I've ever known." And it seemed to me he always had people around or he was always chasing after people, you know, just—and so that made me think a lot about him and helped me understand a lot of what he did, because I believed her. I thought she knew him well enough to say that.

The other thing, the other recollection or memory I have—I have a lot of them of him, but my favorite is one day when I was in the Deputy Mayor's Office, I was working at a satellite office,

but was coming to a late meeting in the District building, and I was in Freedom Plaza crossing over—this is maybe in his third term, second or third term—and he was coming out of the District building, but there was a long line of men, homeless men, waiting to get in, so I guess it was around 7:00 when they could get in, because the city was allowing them to come in at night—

BETTY KING: Oh, is it winter?

LORAINE BENNETT: —in the winter to sleep in the lobby of the District building. But anyway, it was me crossing Pennsylvania Avenue, and there were no other people around except his officers who were with him and the homeless men. But he was going down the line to each one. He didn't see me, and I stayed around the side, and I watched him talk to, oh, at least 10 of them, asking, "Where are you from? How long have you been on the streets? What happened to you?" and listening to the answers, and then going to the next one. And I just loved that, you know, I loved it, because he wasn't doing that for anybody but himself and his own knowledge and his own empathy for them. He was relating to them in a way that I'm sure that if they realized who he was, they never forgot. It's just very touching to me. It's my favorite of all of my observations of him.

BETTY KING: Yes, that's a wonderful memory.

LORAINE BENNETT: Yeah.

BETTY KING: Is there anything else you would like to add to the record?

LORAINE BENNETT: No. I just have a lot of gratitude. I think the city owes him a huge debt. I think he took us from one level of self-understanding of the city, you know, of understanding what community can do, he took it to a whole other level. He made me and I think a lot of people empathetic to people that they never would have been, aware of issues that they never would have been, that were unpleasant to raise, like with the homeless, like the gay community, like a lot of—there were a lot of people that he was an advocate for that weren't the politically popular thing to do when he did it, and I just thank—you know, I just have always appreciated that.

BETTY KING: Yeah. When he talked about serving the least, the lost, and the left out, that was not just rhetoric as far as he was concerned.

LORAINE BENNETT: Right. Right.

BETTY KING: Yeah.

LORAINE BENNETT: Yeah.

BETTY KING: Thank you very much.

LORAINE BENNETT: Sure.